



Viva la villa

Peter Friend and Mark Barber brought this beautiful Art Deco-style villa back to life and fulfilled their lifelong dream of running a luxury *chambres d'hôtes* in the heart of rural France

WORDS: ANNA MCKITTRICK

Clockwise from top left: the villa looks even more impressive at dusk; guests can enjoy dinner in the tables d'hôtes restaurant; the marble fireplaces take centre stage in the bedrooms; Mark and Peter love their new life

With its imposing facade complete with red shutters flanking its vast windows, it's easy to see why this stunning villa in Tarn appealed to Peter Friend and Mark Barber. But you could say that it was chance that the couple ended up in southwest France. Peter and Mark initially settled on Brittany and had even got as far as buying a house when it fell through and they were

back at square one with their property search. Rather than getting downhearted, it actually proved to be the best thing that could have happened to the couple whose aim was to set up a B&B. "We realised it would've been a very short season in Brittany because of the climate so then we did a big road trip and looked at six different properties in four different areas," says Peter. Space was one of the main criteria for

Peter and Mark's French bolt-hole so when they came across a vast property in the town of Mazamet, in Tarn, that also happened to be a rather beautiful Art Deco-style villa, it ticked all the boxes and more.

Mazamet's history is in the wool industry and consequently there are many beautiful properties in the surrounding area which were owned by mill workers. On returning from working overseas the mill workers built houses in styles inspired from their travels abroad giving the properties in the area a multi-cultural feel.

"Each house in the area that we live in is unique. Some are Grecian style, some are typical French period and some look like they're from South America," says Peter. The couple's villa, which sits on a protected quarter of land, was listed among the town's most architecturally important buildings and Peter says a lot of the locals



say it has a very English feel due to the two large bay windows at the front. The couple bought the property in 2005 and spent the next four years slowly renovating the villa and transforming it into a luxury *chambres d'hôtes* which opened for business in May 2009. While the renovations were taking place, Peter and Mark continued to work in the UK flying out on Friday evenings and cramming in a weekend of hard graft before heading back to their hectic jobs.

Peter, who is originally from Cornwall, was in digital development prior to the move and

put in long hours and tiring commutes. Peter and Mark had always set their sights on France and made a pact that when they turned 40 they would make their dream a reality. It had been their intention from the start to run a B&B as Mark, who hails from Cheshire, had worked in the hotel industry for many years.

"Setting up a *chambres d'hôtes* was our sole purpose," says Peter. "We'd long worked for other people and driven thousands of miles and we just wanted to do something completely different for ourselves. We often joke with guests now that our biggest decision of the day is how many croissants to buy. I swapped a commute around the M25 for a 500-metre walk to the pâtisserie."

Peter and Mark initially thought that the property, which dates from 1934, didn't need much work aside from putting in extra bathrooms and rewiring, but once they started the renovations they realised the whole house needed re-plumbing adding an extra €45,000/£37,920 to their building costs.

Part of the appeal of property was that, unusually for France, it had a large number of bedrooms that were already en suite making the transformation from home to business easier. Original features such as the Art Deco-style bathroom fittings and the beautiful marble fireplaces that feature in each bedroom were kept and add to the period feel of the property.

Peter, who enlisted the help of a stylish friend to help create the interior, sums up the style of the villa as calm luxury: "A friend of mine is an interior designer for a big hotel company so she gave us lots of ideas and we came up with one theme for a bedroom and stuck to the colour palette for all the bedrooms just mixing in different fabrics."

Peter and Mark used Farrow & Ball and Fired Earth paints in understated shades of cream and pale green, adding texture to the bedrooms and living areas by introducing sumptuous textiles. Far from creating a B&B lacking in personality, the couple has put their own stamp on the property by sourcing second-hand pieces





and incorporating them into the design. Peter says: "For the last two years before we moved, we spent every weekend going to *brocantes* in France and antique shops in the UK. We wanted to buy arts and crafts style furniture, mostly oak to go with the oak parquet flooring, and we wanted to mix in some old pieces that were originally from the 1930s and 1940s with modern things like big comfy beds."

Peter says they love going to flea markets in France even though they can be a bit hit and miss at times: "You go to *brocantes* and they are sometimes very much like junk shops and others which are very expensive. But there are lots of *brocantes* in the area and we

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were lucky picking up some nice pieces and we still do. We picked up a new bookcase just yesterday. We're always seeing things that we can tweak in the house and when you see something you think, 'yes that'll work well in the lounge or in room three'".

Rather than hanging up their tool belts once the guest rooms and lounge areas had been renovated, Peter and Mark are constantly thinking of ways to evolve the business and the villa to work for both them and their guests. The

property has eight bedrooms, five of which are en suite guest rooms, but the couple are in the process of converting the attic into a two-bedroom apartment to give themselves more of their own space and also somewhere for family and friends to stay. "It's surprising when you move to France how many of your old friends find you," laughs Peter.

The couple had initially wanted to create spa facilities in the villa but due to budget restrictions, they had to put it on hold until the end of the first season, which proved very fruitful and enabled them to convert the basement. The couple has added an extra string to their bow by introducing the spa area which includes a sauna and Jacuzzi and they can also arrange massages from a local masseuse.

La Villa de Mazamet offers guests evening meals in their *tables d'hôtes* restaurant, serving a four-course menu six nights a week with Peter in charge of the cooking while Mark looks after front of house. Being in the kitchen has allowed Peter to indulge in his love of food: "It's come from more of a passion and lots of practice rather than being a connoisseur. Before we moved to France we practised by doing dinner parties for large groups of friends and the first night that we opened we did dinner for 16 people three nights running. It was a baptism of fire."

Peter focuses on creating regional dishes and enjoys going to the local markets to source fresh seasonal produce which he says not only ensures you get the best ingredients but is also a good way of settling into life in rural France: "One of the important things is to make sure you use local suppliers – be it the pâtisserie or the markets – and that's paid dividends for us."

The couple are now in their third year of business and their combination of relaxed and luxurious surroundings mixed with exceptional service is proving to be a hit with guests. Last year La Villa de Mazamet was rated the number one *chambres d'hôtes* in France based on reviews from the site TripAdvisor so it's clear that Peter and Mark are on to a winner. www.villademazamet.com

This page, clockwise from top left: unwind in the spa area; soak the rays and then cool down in the villa's pool; roll top baths in the deluxe bathroom add to the luxury feel of the villa